A Special Meeting of the Apalachicola City Commission was held on Tuesday July 21, 2026, at 4pm, at the Commission Meeting Room located at 74 6th Street, Apalachicola, Fl.

Present: Mayor Brenda Ash, Commissioner Donna Knutson, Commissioner Adrienne Elliott, Commissioner Despina George, City Manager Chuck Anderson, Finance Director Lee Mathes, Chief Chase Richards, and City Clerk Sheneidra Cummings.

Commissioner Donna Duncan arrived at 4:30pm due to an emergency court proceeding.

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Ash followed by invocation and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Agenda Adoption

Motion to adopt the agenda was made by Commissioner Elliott and seconded by Commissioner Knutson. No discussion. None Opposed. Motion carried, 4-0.

PRESENTATION: Proclamation – Mr. Boyd "Sandy" Howze

Prior to the commencement of business, Mayor Ash offered condolences to the family of former Mayor Boyd W. "Sandy" Howze Jr., who passed away on July 18, 2026. Mayor Ash read into the record a proclamation honoring the life and legacy of Mayor Howze, a fifth-generation Apalachicolian, United States Navy veteran, and Mayor of the City of Apalachicola from 2003 through 2007. The proclamation recognized his military service, civic leadership, commitment to historic preservation, and environmental stewardship, and extended the City's heartfelt condolences to his wife Edna, his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and extended family. The proclamation was ordered to be shared with the family in advance of the memorial service on Thursday.

Public Comment

No public comment was received at this time.

New Business #1: FY 26/27 Budget Calendar – Adoption

Finance Director Lee Mathes presented the proposed Fiscal Year 2026–2027 budget calendar, noting that workshop dates are flexible while public hearing dates are fixed and cannot be altered.

A Motion was made by Commissioner George to approve the Fiscal Year 2026–2027 Budget Calendar. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Elliott. There was no discussion and no opposition. Motion carried, 4-0.

New Business #2: Tentative Millage Rate FY 26/27 –Adoption

Finance Director Mathes advised the Commission that, due to legislative changes enacted this session, the maximum allowable millage levy for FY 2026–2027 had been recalculated to 8.627479, compared to the City's current millage rate of 8.3457. City Manager Anderson clarified that the new cap is derived from the rollback rate plus 110 percent, a change tied to anticipated state tax legislation. Director Mathes further noted that the difference between the current and maximum rates represents approximately $88,000 in additional revenue.

Commissioner George moved to set the tentative millage rate at the current rate of 8.3457, rather than the maximum allowable rate, citing concerns about the negative impact that an inflated tentative rate has on property owners who receive TRIM notices reflecting proposed taxes based on a rate the Commission has no intention of assessing. Commissioner George noted that, with taxable values increasing by approximately 9.79 percent, holding the millage rate steady would still yield an increase of approximately $153,000 in ad valorem tax revenue. Commissioner George also summarized the new legislative voting thresholds: a simple majority is required to adopt a rate at or below rollback; a two-thirds supermajority (4 of 5) is required for a rate between rollback and 110 percent of rollback; and a majority vote or referendum is required above that threshold.

Mayor Ash noted that the potential passage of Amendment 3 in November could significantly impact future budgets, with Finance Director Mathes estimating a loss of approximately $340,000 in Year 1 (with the $150,000 homestead exemption increase) and approximately $500,000 in Year 2 (with the $250,000 exemption). City Manager Anderson added that reductions to the non-school millage cap from 10 percent to 5 percent would present an additional fiscal constraint.

A Motion was made by Commissioner George to adopt a tentative millage rate of 8.3457 for Fiscal Year 2026–2027. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Elliott. There was no discussion and no opposition. Motion carried, 4-0.

New Business #3. Strategic Plan Goals – Adoption

City Manager Anderson and strategic planning consultant Charles Chapman of 4C4 Strategies presented nine draft two-year strategic goals for Commission consideration, representing Phase 2 of a three-phase planning process. The goals were developed from community stakeholder focus group sessions, public online input, and individual commissioner interviews. A ninth goal, addressing compliance with House Bill 4103-2026 and the transition of the City's utility system to an independent utility district, was added by the City Manager.

Mr. Chapman advised the Commission that all nine goals are considered important and equal in standing at this stage, and that further prioritization would naturally emerge once detailed objectives and action steps are developed. He identified the utility transfer under HB 4103 as the most time-sensitive goal given its legislatively imposed deadline, and cautioned against rigid prioritization of the remaining goals, noting that flexibility to respond quickly to grant opportunities and other emerging circumstances would be an asset. He also presented financial impact projections related to Amendment 3, estimating statewide impacts of $11.8 billion to local governments, with Apalachicola specifically facing losses ranging from approximately $350,000 in Year 1 to $875,000 by Year 5 when accounting for both the homestead exemption increase and the non-homestead cap adjustment.

City Manager Anderson expressed general support for the goals, noting that some objectives will require contracted services — such as a compensation and classification salary study estimated at approximately $10,000 — and cautioned that City staff is not a deep bench, particularly given the anticipated reduction in personnel following the utility transfer. He expressed confidence that opportunities to advance multiple goals simultaneously would present themselves and committed to developing a structured monthly workshop calendar to facilitate community engagement and guide goal implementation.

The Commission discussed the following key points during deliberation:

Commissioner Elliott expressed support for expanding the first goal beyond historic preservation for economic value to encompass culture, ecotourism, and the living community that defines Apalachicola. She raised a substantive concern regarding Sunshine Law constraints on advisory boards, particularly with respect to the proposed Waterfront Development Advisory Board, noting that key stakeholders such as seafood industry operators may be unwilling to serve if bound by Sunshine Law restrictions. She suggested that a robust schedule of public workshops could serve as an effective and legally unconstrained alternative to formal advisory boards.

Commissioner Knutson agreed that the workshop calendar approach could potentially fulfill the intent of both the citizen advisory board and waterfront advisory board goals, effectively rendering them complete without the need for formal boards. She also noted that the nine goals are not equal in terms of required effort and recommended that objectives be organized using a prioritization matrix — such as a two-by-two grid of effort versus impact — to identify quick wins and manage workload transparently.

Commissioner George expressed support for leaving all nine goals on the table without pausing any, pending the development of concrete action steps, which she noted would more fully define the intent and achievability of each goal. She acknowledged the work of the community focus group and recommended the Commission give the full list a fair opportunity to be developed through the objective-setting process.

Commissioner Duncan, expressed agreement with the priority placed on workforce and staffing, and noted the importance of ensuring that city ordinances are accessible and understandable to residents.

Mayor Ash identified HB 4103 utility transition and employee recruitment and retention as her personal top priorities, noting that without adequate staffing, the City would face difficulty executing the remaining goals given existing capacity constraints.

Public comment was received from Anita Grove, a former Chamber of Commerce director and community advocate with extensive experience on prior waterfront and planning committees. Ms. Grove urged the Commission to ensure that goal language is clearly defined and outcomes measurable. She recommended that the City focus on reviewing and enforcing existing ordinances as the most effective lever for achieving the historic preservation and waterfront development goals, rather than forming new committees. She also referenced prior salary studies and planning efforts, noted the availability of existing partners such as Historic Apalachicola, and highlighted accessory dwelling units and code enforcement as actionable tools for addressing housing affordability.

Mayor-elect, who was present in the audience, expressed support for the workshop-based approach and echoed the sentiment that the topics raised during public comment were appropriate candidates for future workshop agendas.

A Motion was made by Commissioner George to approve the nine two-year strategic plan goals as presented. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Knutson. There was no further discussion and no opposition. Motion carried, 5-0.

Commissioner Elliott announced a special joint meeting scheduled for Tuesday, July 28, 2026, at 9:30 AM at the Armory, involving Franklin County, the Airport Operations Economic Development Board, the Franklin County Economic Development Council, and Team Franklin, to discuss economic development collaboration.

Adjournment

A Motion was made by Commissioner Elliott to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Knutson. No discussion. No opposition. Motion carried, 5-0.

Meeting adjourned.

BRENDA ASH, MAYOR

ATTEST:

SHENEIDRA CUMMINGS, CITY CLERK